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C.I.A. Has $100 Million, a Point to Prove

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WASHINGTON

OVER the next year, the Central Intelligence Agency will undergo one of the most public tests in its largely secret history. With day-to-day responsibility for directing $100 million of American aid to the Nicaraguan rebels, the agency will have a chance to silence critics who say it is not up to running paramilitary operations.

The issue is decades old, dating at least to the furor over the agency's role in the failed Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba in 1961. More recently, some military officers at the Pentagon, who support the Reagan Administration policy of assisting anti-Soviet insurgencies, have questioned the agency's ability to arm and assist guerrilla movements involving thousands of people and many tons of weapons. Administration opponents in Congress, meanwhile, have expressed concern that the intelligence agency may lack adequate control over its operatives in the field.

Neither concern is shared by William J. Casey, the Director of Central Intelligence. Administration officials say he is among the Administration's most vigorous advocates of covert activities. One official said Mr. Casey has spoken privately of the military successes he believes the $100 million aid package will bring the Nicaraguan rebels, or contras.

The C.I.A. has repeatedly denied, however, that it was responsible for the private efforts to supply the contras after Congress ended the aid program in 1984. Administration officials insist that the agency's new covert program will be far more efficient than the operation that provided the cargo plane shot down over Nicaragua last month as it attempted to bring supplies to the contras. Nicaragua has said that the downed plane carried incriminating documents. Last week in Managua, the surviving crew member, Eugene Hasenfus, refused to make a statement or identify the purported documents during his trial by a revolutionary tribunal.

The C.I.A. was deeply involved in supporting paramilitary operations in the 1960's and 1970's, from the Bay of Pigs to Laos. But after the defeat of American-backed forces in Vietnam in 1975, there was little enthusiasm for new adventures. Congress cut off C.I.A. involvement in Angola, a ban that the Administration succeeded in getting lifted last year.

Clandestine aid for the Nicaraguan rebels, starting in 1981, was one of the Administration's first attempts to return to paramilitary operations. Criticism mounted, however, after the disclosure that the C.I.A. had been involved in mining a Nicaraguan harbor. Congress, concerned that the operations might lead eventually to direct American military involvement, had cut off support for clandestine aid. The agency's critics were bolstered when it was later learned that an officer under contract to the C.I.A. had written a manual for the guerrillas that endorsed political assasinations.

Mr. Casey, however, has characterized the 1980's "as the decade of guerrillas resisting Communist regimes." Stating that the Soviet Union uses a wide variety of foreign proxies and agents, he contends that the "C.I.A. is the one organization in the free world most capable of dealing with this enormous Soviet apparatus and frustrating its objectives." The agency is also assisting insurgents in Cambodia, Angola, Ethiopia and Afghanistan, mainly by supplying weapons, Administration officials have said, and has successfully resisted attempts by some quarters in the Pentagon to assume a more prominent role.

Limited Ability

Now C.I.A. officers are expected to be more active in guiding the Nicaraguan contras. They need all the help they can get, military analysts say, to counter what Mr. Casey says is a major Soviet presence. With little military experience and poor equipment, the contras are vastly outnumbered and outgunned by Nicaragua's army and militia.

In dispensing the $100 million of contra aid, the State Department is to provide policy guidance, while training is performed by the Army Special Forces, or Green Berets, under C.I.A. supervision. Officials have expressed concern about possible friction between the intelligence agency and the Army. Some military officers argue that the agency's operatives are ill-prepared to deal with military matters. Said one Congressional aide familiar with the issue: "There are a lot of people in the Pentagon who would be happy if the agency fell flat on its face in Nicaragua."

Viewing the problem from a different perspective, Representative Richard Cheney, Republican of Wyoming, argues that the Government's ability to support insurgencies is "very limited." Mr. Cheney, a member of the intelligence committee, believes American interests are likely to be increasingly tied to support of anti-Soviet forces in the third world. Thus, he has said, the Administration should re-examine the types of weapons it supplies for guerrilla operations. Formerly, the covert programs provided Soviet-made or other foreign arms to insurgents in Afghanistan and elsewhere, leaving the agency free to deny American involvement. That approach was eroded this year when the Administration decided to send American-made antiaircraft missiles to the Angolan rebels. "It may be that the kinds of equipment we develop for reasonably well-educated American troops may be totally inappropriate for the jungle war in Angola or Afghanistan." Mr. Cheney said.